Beyond the Pleasure Principle: A Creativity for Self Recognition: A Study in Selected Poems of Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

The poetry of Sylvia Plath attracts the attention of both readers and critics for her fabulous craft which she wields to dramatize her own embittered personal experiences. She remains one of the well known figures whose poetic works are critically appreciated and new phases of meanings and implications are innovatively concluded. Her poetic craft stems from her whirlwind relationships with her family members in addition to some other harsh events which force her to commit suicide in February 11, 1963.

The present study aims to evaluate some selected poems of Plath from a Freudian perspective of the pleasure and reality principles and instincts cited in his theory of ***Beyond the Pleasure Principle****. It also tries to show how the death instinct or Thanatos prevails to enable her to realize her true self lost under the heartrending impact of these harsh events by committing suicide.*

ما فوق مبدأ اللذة: إبداع لإدراك الذات: دراسة في قصائد مختارة للشاعرة سيلفيا بلاث

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الخلاصة

استقطب شعر سيلفيا بلاث اهتمام النقاد و القراء كونه عصارة مهارتها الإبداعية التي من خلالها أباحت عن تجاربها المريرة عُدَت بلاث واحدة من شخوص الشعر الذين نظموا أعمالا شعرية فذة ذات معان خلاقة. ا ن علاقة بلاث الاجتماعية المضطرمة هي إحدى العوامل الرئيسية التي آلت بها إلى الانتحار في ١١ شباط ١٩٦٣. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى دراسة قصائد مختارة للشاعرة من منظور فرويد لِلَذة و الواقع المستمد بطبيعته من نظرية ما فوق مبدأ اللذة و كذلك لتحري بعض الأسباب التي أدت الى سيطرة غريزة الموت (ثاناتوس) التي قادت الشاعرة إلى الانتحار كوسيلة لإدراك ذاتها التي فقدتها تحت وطأة الظروف المحزنة التي أحاطت بها طيلة حياتها.

Sylvia Plath: a Woman and Artist.

The examination of the poetry of Sylvia Plath indicates that it has not been weighted as a mere confessional due to its handling of her personal experiences but, succinctly, as a conscious process through which experience and emotion play an essential role to harness a poetic voice of her deep inner lost self. Her poetry is an apparent reflection of her wretched sorrow and pain that forces her to realize that she loses her true self in time when her late poetic voice becomes an inspired voice of death as the only way to recognize her true self since all the ways seem closed to her. This recognition is, of course, expected under the harsh facts of reality. Accordingly, this psychological interpretation of Plath's emotional multi-faceted state sheds a light upon her inner thought towards a milieu in which communicating sorrowful feelings seems farfetched. To meticulously explicate Plath's poetry, a careful critical investigation of her life and career is required in order to trace the maze of her poetic voice especially from a psychological perspective. Apparently, Plath's voice in her poems is ratified as the authentic one since it does not envision the spectrum of her life and experiences, but because she writes within her life, involving her grievous emotions with much impressive power and intensity.[1]

Plath struggles the agony and frustration of the painful events which she faces from time to time. Every distressing event has its influence on her psychological state and, alongside, her poetic growth. As an artist, Plath persists on envisioning her painful experiences through a distinctive poetic voice.

In early 1956, Plath knows that her grandmother, Grammy Schober, has a stomach cancer and she is about to die. In one of her journal entries, Plath reveals her inner melancholic thoughts when she realizes the death of her grandmother:

> I love that woman [Grandmother Schober], I can't believe she could go out of the world and me not there; I can't believe home could be without her. It sickens me; afar off, I think of her and cry. Those presences, those people loved and gone into the dark, I rail and rage … (*Journals*, 230)[2]

In spite of the drastic shocks and chaotic experiences in her life, Plath pursues her study with Fulbright Scholarship at Newnham College, Cambridge. Aurelia describes these moments as the

most exciting and colorful of Sylvia's life; Plath's existence in England is regarded with little sympathy by those writing about her.[3]

While attending at Newnham College, Plath meets the British poet Ted Hughes. This meeting represents a watershed in her life. Having a mutual relationship and resident feelings, Plath meets him many times as she feels passionate, regarding him as the knight of her dreams. Thereafter, Plath and Hughes married on 1956 in London at a time when she feels that Hughes is the man who will compensate her all bereavement and grief of the past.

In its earliest stages, Plath's marriage from Hughes continues with a complete pleasure as she pursues her academic and inspiringly develops her poetic energy. Hughes's presence in her life helps her to alleviate her disturbed psyche and to reinforce her poetic talent. Elucidating this impact Marsack mentions "[i]t is clear that Ted Hughes's reading and criticism of her work was vital to its development."[4]

As Hughes's reputation increases and becomes reputable worldwide, Plath's jealousy towards him gets in turmoil. Marsack accomplishes the picture of her grim feeling when he adds "… when that working relationship ended with the break-up of their marriage, Plath felt that a great repressed emotion was coming to the surface and increasingly she seemed to be writing for herself alone. "[5]

Accordingly, Plath suffers from an aggravated mental breakdown and develops an unimagined jealousy and malevolence under the heedlessness and maltreatment of Hughes. In 13 October 1959 entry, Plath enunciates her depressed thought of her open-ended sorrow:

> Very depressed today, unable to write a thing. Menacing gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness. I look down into the warm, earthly world. Into a nest of lover's beds, baby cribs, meal tables, all the solid commerce of life in this earth and feel apart, enclosed in a wall of glass. (*Journals*, 517)

Though, Plath's ebullience and devotion is, once again, suppressed when she has a miscarriage and soon has her appendix out.[6] On April, 1963 Plath becomes severely depressed. Her doctor prescribes her a course of anti-depressant drugs and calls on a nurse to take care of her. When she arrives at her flat, Plath commits suicide by gassing herself heinously in the kitchen.[7]

Since Plath is the landmark of the confessional poets among the mid-twentieth century American poets, and since she deliberately intends to confess what is within her psyche like the sorrowful feelings and frustrations which are deeply stemmed from her personal experiences, the

psychological insight cannot be ignored or underestimated in her poetic works. In fact, the critical views of Plath show that her poetry is the self poetry and the psychological aspect is an inestimable part of it.

In this respect, in one of his interviews, Hughes remarks on Plath's writings as opposing to what she thinks a proper thing to write about; instead, she expresses her psychology

> The shock of Sylvia's writing, when she really began to write, was that she was doing the very opposite of what she would normally have considered a proper thing to write about … What she'd done was to reclaim her entire psychology.[8]

Likewise, Helen Vendler comments on Plath's writing under the impact of the aggressive forces resulted from her depressing experiences:

> The harsh critiques of Plath's poems of violence and melodrama bear witness not only to the disturbing force with which the death drive grasped her being but also to her success in transmitting that force in aggressive language. It needs to be recommended that she was a more exigent critic of herself than any commentator has been.[9]

Furthermore, Plath's poetic voice is regarded the representative of the self situation and is associated with the Freudian psychological heritage. Hence , Helen Mcneil illuminates that there is a coincidence between Plath's rendering of self and Freud:

> Plath's poems represent the situation of the self as given, using a mixed, adaptable inheritance of mythic imagery to convince the readers of the authenticity of the self's situation. Plath's "myth" of self includes not only classical myth but also fairy tale, … there are even revisions of Freud himself.[10]

In essence, it becomes obvious from these critical views on the psychological aspect in Plath's poetry that she strives to reveal her inner thoughts and tackle the outer world that becomes a source of unrelieved agony.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: a Freudian Constitute for Confessional Cult.

As indicated earlier, the study of Plath's poetry, as a confessional poet, from a psychological perspective is not manipulated in deep; most of the psychological studies handle specific concepts in a nutshell. Since the present study aims at explicating selected poems of Plath in context of one of Freud's notable theories, it is desirable to render some of Freud's accounts as far as the development of his theory *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is concerned.

In his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states that there are two distinguished kinds of instincts: those that lead the living to death, and the sexual instincts which attempt to

eternally achieve a renewal of life.[11] Thus, these two kinds of instinct are automatically regulated by the pleasure principle.[12] For the more precise analysis of the instincts, Philip G. Zimbardo reinforces that there are the ego instinct and the sexual instinct and each one has its function:

> Ego instincts are part of the system of self-preservation. Sexual instincts involve the need for survival of the species. But Freud greatly expanded the notion of human sexuality with his view of the sexual or life instinct, also called *eros*.[13]

Apparently, the major task of the sexual instinct is to get pleasure and keep the renewal of species. While on the major task of the ego instinct is also to get pleasure but under the pressure of the outer world. The ego, then, gets out of the control of the pleasure principle in order to secure the delayed or even limited pleasure; it is transformed into what is called the reality principle:

> We know that the pleasure principle is proper to a *primary* method of working on the part of the mental apparatus, but that, from the point of view of the self-preservation of the organism among the difficulties of the external world, it is from the very outset inefficient and even highly dangerous. Under the influence of the ego's instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the *reality principle*.[14]

Significantly, the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle is considered as a worth noting in Freud's theory of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in general and in the step taken by the ego in particular. When man undergoes the painful experiences of life, the ego seeks the postponed or limited pleasure under the regulation of the reality principle. Thereafter, Freud distinguishes between the two principles, regarding them the regulators of man's mental apparatus

> The physical apparatus had to decide to form a conception of the real circumstances in the external world and to endeavour to make a real alteration in them. A new principle of mental functioning was thus introduced. What was presented in the mind was no longer agreeable but what was real, even if it happened to be disagreeable. This setting-up of the reality principle proved to be a momentous step.[15]

Moreover, Freud further concludes that the mental apparatus consists of two instincts: the sexual instincts or Eros and the death instinct or Thanatos:

> We have to distinguish two classes of instincts;

> one of which, the *sexual instincts* or *Eros*, is by far the more conspicuous and accessible to study [and] … a *death instinct*, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state … .[16]

The emergence of the death instinct is a noteworthy development in Freud's theory of beyond the pleasure principle. It sums up the struggle between life and death. Laplanche contends that the death instinct is one of the compelling ideas to emerge in Freud's work and it is essential to his thought. It is a new development from his earlier work, beyond his metapsychological considerations and his system which was on the verge to reform.[17]

In order to further clarify the conception of instincts, it is essential to mention, in brief, Freud's experience of the children's game and the experience of the patients of trauma from the World War I. The development of Freud's conception of instincts is noted in his experience of the children's game when he notes the child repeating certain experience to find pleasure in it. He, then, refers to this phenomenon as compulsion to repeat which is observed in the child's behaviour. For Freud, the compulsion is derived from the child's instincts and it is powerful enough to disregard the pleasure principle.[18] Freud adds

> In the case of the children's play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively. Each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of.[19]

Accordingly, the pleasure principle is obviously adhered by Plath. The repetition is employed not only as a stylistic device, but also as a procedure to attain enough pleasure and, at the same time, to have an outlet for her inner disturbed feelings. This repetition as a stylistic technique and poetic device coincides with Freud's concept of compulsion to repeat.

The study of Plath's poetry provides a thematically rich opportunity to explore such a kind of adherence so as , in Freud's terminology, to seek the self recognition . Being still concerned with Freud's theory, the decline of the pleasure principle and the adherence of the reality principle is keenly observed by Freud and mostly adhered by Plath. In his observation of a child's behaviour concerning pleasure attainment, he realizes that the child, when deprived from pleasure, attempts to get pleasure in various doings and activities. In his analysis of one of the cases, Freud concludes that the child, when his mother departs, attempts to get pleasure of another kind just because it is immediate and fulfilling:

> The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent. How then does his repetition of this distressing experience as a game fit in with the

> pleasure principle? … For, in the case we have been discussing, the child may, after all, only have been able to repeat his unpleasant experience in play because the repetition carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort but none the less a direct one.[20]

Alongside, Freud's experiences on the patients who suffered from the trauma of World War I consolidates the concept of instincts as well as the alternative forms of it, represented by aggression and destructiveness. By observing the patients' rehearsal of the fierce action they faced, Freud asserts the existence of the death instinct. Concerning this Freudian contribution, Zimbardo adds:

> Clinical observation of patients who had suffered from traumatic experiences associated with world war I led Freud to go beyond the pleasure principle. Thanatos, or the death instinct, is a tension that drives people toward aggressive and destructive behaviour. It is part of the tendency for all living things to return to an inorganic state, to entropy.[21]

The traumatic experience is resulted from the harmful effect of the stimulation which breaks the protecting boundaries of the mind of the patient, causing neurosis. The mental apparatus defends against this mentally harsh attack by giving the patient an opportunity to rehearse the heartbreaking experience or, at least, by associating other accidents relating to it. The reality principle, then, is the guide of the process of protecting the mind by repeating this sorrowful experience. Freud illuminates:

> It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy and to set in motion in every defensive measure. At the same time, the pleasure principle is for the moment put out of action. There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead — the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the physical sense, so that they can then be disposed of.[22]

As shown in Freud's statement, the rehearsal of the grim experiences under the guidance of reality principle does not mean that the patient attains no pleasure. The proceeding of the reality principle, as Freud concludes, enables the patient to attain pleasure when pleasure itself out of action, even postponed or limited pleasure.

More broadly, Freud explores the two principles and the complicated between them. He also insists that the death instinct can take the form of a merciless force, especially when man

lives under the pressure of the hard reality of life. It is in this respect Freud indicates the proceeding of the two principles:

> We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our body … from the external world … and finally our relations to other men. The suffering which comes from the last source is perhaps more painful to us than nay other … It is no wonder if, under the pressure of these possibilities of suffering, men are accustomed to moderate their claims to happiness — just as the pleasure principle itself, indeed, under the influence of the external world, changed into the more modest reality principle.[23]

Overtly, Freud refers to the three sources of man's suffering and concentrates upon the last one, the relations among people, as a source of more painful suffering than the other sources. Under the influence of theses sources in general and the last one in particular, man seeks pleasure attainment while he is under the restraint of the outer world, when the pleasure principle is changed into the reality principle. Per se, the role of civilization is predominant in presenting the life instinct or Eros and death instinct or Thanatos. According to this evolution, Freud remarks:

> I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and
>
> death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species.[24]

In addition, Freud elucidates that a portion of the death instinct is directed towards the outer world in a form of aggression and destructiveness. By taking this form, this instinct proceeds in the service of the life instinct because it enables the organism to destruct something else. Otherwise, it will increase, leading to self-destruction,

> A more fruitful idea was that a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness. In this way the instinct itself could be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self. Conversely, any restriction of this aggressiveness directed outwards would be bound to increase the self-destruction, which is in any case proceeding.[25]

It becomes quite obvious that Freud's account of the death instinct and its alternative forms, aggression and destructiveness, all stem from the pressures of the hard reality of life. The

mid-twentieth century American poetry is characterized by its adherence of the reality principle. The confessional poetry, as a prevailing movement at that time, is regarded as a reaction against the drastic age of modernity and of New Critical complexity. Through their writing, the confessional poets challenge an era which pays no consideration for any psychic need or spiritual demand of man. Indeed, the term confessional refers to thosepoets as Beach states:

> who chose to reject modernist difficulty and New Critical complexity in favor of a more relaxed or personal voice. It also allowed poets to articulate feelings, thoughts, and emotions that challenged the decorum of an era marked by its containment of psychic needs and desires.[26]

They also react against the abusive cultural norms which characterize the mid-twentieth century American zeitgeist, represented by the repression of grief and the plowing under of traumatic experience.[27] They strive to confess their own personal experiences and inward feelings. More specific to the point, Diane Middlebrook mentions that the confessional poetry explores "the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class life … divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect and the mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life."[28]

From the Reality Principle to the Triumph of Thanatos: Plath's Quest for Self Recognition.

To critically examine Plath's poetic body from a psychological perspective, it is rather consequential to tackle it from its early stages since the main concern of the present study is to explicate her of the pleasure or reality principle as a quest for the true self she is in search of. In fact, when reading Plath's juvenilia poems, written before 1956 and published in *The Collected Poems* 1981, one may think that the poet's tone is corroborated by the pleasure principle as they are written during her juvenility. On the opposite, these poems represent a credential embodiment of dreary experiences Plath faced and withstood. Despite the unpretentiousness of her early poems, they hint for a promising poetic voice that becomes a monumental confessional voice in the mid twentieth century American poetic tradition. As Gill states with respect to Plath's juvenilia poems, asserting that they vaticinate for her later notable concerns:

> The poems represented in the Juvenilia section of Plath's *Collected Poems* are proficient technically (the sestinas, villanelles, and sonnets, for example, show a young writer of ambition, handling her material confidently) and include works of psychological and even political conviction … The juvenilia provide evidence of Plath's long and intense apprenticeship and offer insights into the early seeds of some of her later concerns.[29]

As revealed by Gill, the implications of Plath's early poems are mainly about psychological and political issues which both reverberate a state of dejected sense. What proves that is that the main themes in these poems find their poetic echoes, thematically and technically, in her later works when she audaciously writes about themes in which she seeks to find a solution for the crux of the lost self. Attentively, she employs a restricted formal style to uncover her disturbed emotions. Vendler considers this restraint, alongside with melodrama, as a contest revealing her psychic malaise. She remarks:

> In Sylvia Plath's juvenilia, we can see that the chief danger to her style is restraint: formality encases her emotions. And yet her style was endangered equally — once she allowed emotion its freedom — by a theatricalizing melodrama. Both of these dangers always hovered over her poetry, and no one — as we can see in her journals and letters — was more aware of their perils than she.[30]

As this statement indicates, from her earlier girlhood, Plath's source of suffering is mostly from the outer world in which she lives. As the harsh events take place repeatedly in her life, she realizes that she is incapable of fulfilling her wishes as a young girl or even communicating her sorrow to others. In this context, Freud asserts that happiness can be attained through the fulfillment from the outer world, otherwise, our needs will be changed into a cause of unbearable sufferings. Thus, "[j]ust as a satisfaction of instinct spells happiness for us, so severe suffering is caused us if the external world lets us starve, if it refuses to sate our needs."[31]

It is extremely obvious that the adherence of the pleasure principle could rarely be realized in Plath's early works because, as Freud concludes, she has not found any kind of spiritual or physical gratification in her early girlhood. When a poet is in a satisfied state, his/her poetic implications will, no doubt, communicate the pleasurable as a part of his vision since the poet is a man talking to men.[32] If the poet has a little opportunity to attain pleasure even in its lowest levels, his/her poetic talent will be eclipsed by the reality principle , in Freud's terms. Overtly, being a typical confessional poet, Plath could not attain the pleasure she is urgently longing for from the outer world, what is negatively reflected on her inner psyche, the prevalence of the reality principle can obviously be traced.

"Cinderella" is one of Plath's juvenilia poems that tackles both her state as a young girl and the fleeting of time with uncertainty. In this poem, the girl stands for the poet herself, reflecting her inner premonition:

> The early 1950 poem "Cinderella," … [h]eavily reliant on imagistic description, the poem concentrates on the unreality and fleeting attainability of this world for the girl … The true dangers in Plath's poem, as in the original fairy tale, are the girl's

> precarious pretending to be princess and the passage of time … Through her inversion of the original tale here, Plath emphasizes the importance of youth and beauty in the girl's world …[33]

With reference to this poem, in one of her 1950s journal entries, Plath records her lovely description of the character of Cinderella:

> She's short and luscious. You notice her short "thumpable" nose, her long lashes, her green eyes, her long waist-length hair, her tiny waist. She is Cinderella. … Her face is cute with white teeth under a bright lipsticked mouth.
>
> (*Journals*, 38)

Apparently, Plath's confessional touch in this poem is her rendering of Cinderella as an ordinary girl, thinking of such temporal issues as the passage of time and the awareness of the future which she relies upon as a heavy courier of everything fulfilling her desire as a young girl. Unlike the real Cinderella, Plath's girl clings to the prince and, at that moment, hears the flux of time:

> Follow holiday revel begun long since,
> Until hear twelve the strange girl all at once
> Guilt-stricken halts, pales, clings to the prince
>
> As amid the hectic music and cocktail talk
> She hears the caustic ticking of the clock.
>
> (*CP*,10-14, 304)[34]

Plath's inversion of the true fairy tale of Cinderella is noteworthy. It reflects the eclipse of the reality principle over the pleasure principle in Freud's terms. Instead of producing a pleasant narrative poem about Cinderella, the poet modifies the true story as to convey her own grim thought. Her endeavor to cling to the prince indicates her deprivation from the physical gratification, while on her hearing of the passage of time hints for her worry for the loss of the present moment with which self recognition is conjugated. Thus, the passage of time is a prediction of the loss of the self. Freud states that when man undergoes the painful experience, what is presented in his mind is no longer agreeable, but real. According to him, Plath's source of the painful sufferings during her early childhood is the external world. Being put under the harshness of reality, Plath renders the character of Cinderella of recuperation of the lost self. It can also be considered as a poetic voice that calls for her self recognition under the control of the reality principle.

As a matter of fact, Plath's increased depression and open ended anguish becomes as much expressed as her poetic development progresses. The later poems of juvenilia still written

before 1956 are characterized by their mature diction, reliant rhyme schemes, proficient poetic forms and much clearer confessions. In her poem “Never try to trick me with a kiss,” Plath talks about her solicitude and the absence of a man in her life and, at the same time, the death of her father when she was too young. As its title associates, the poem approaches the poet’s eagerness for the man whom she considers the knight of her dreams. She is not only longing for the physical gratification represented by a tricky kiss, but, spiritually, for a dream of a man who can shoulder the duty of marriage and support her to realize her self. Undeniably, the reference to the dead man refers to her late father. Being absent too early in her life, Plath’s reference to him is mourning. While the man is trying to kiss her, “[t]he dying man will scoff in scorn at this.” (*CP*,3, 319) The demonstrative pronoun “this” (3,319) refers to the tricky situation in which the man attempts to seduce her as the dead man will be embarrassed by such a shameful seduction. The poet, then, tackles both her need for a man as a life sharer and, lamentably, the absence of her father.

Moreover, in the third stanza, the image of the doctor represents the outer world in which the poet lives. Wile on the patients stand for the people living around her to whom she is incapable of confessing the misery she endures:

> Our noble doctor claims the pain is his,
> While stricken patients let him have his say;
> The dying man will scoff in scorn at this.
>
> (*CP*,7-9, 320)

No doubt, the poem marks Plath’s inspiring poetic development. The use of alliteration enhances the poem’s rapture and exaggerates its main themes which are reverberations of her inner thoughts. Being built upon villanelle, the repetition, within its technique, is of primal significance here. Per se, Freud’s experience with the children’s game is significant to be reexamined. The child’s repetition of the game as an experience to sate his need is identified as a compulsion to repeat. This phenomenon, Freud adds, is rooted in the child’s instincts and is reliable enough to replace the pleasure principle and its functioning.

As a pleasure seeker, Plath employs the form of villanelle in general, and the repetition , as included within its technique, in particular for an essential demand. In this poem, the repetition of the lines enables the poet to soothe her torture. Hence, can further be appreciated as a carefully harnessed poetic device that, in one way or another, reinforces the poet’s attitude to attain pleasure and fulfill her longings since “[m]y life may at last get into my writing.” (*Journals*, 441)

Apparently, as her poetic genius progresses, Plath's coming phase of poetry is of observed development. Her poetic voice becomes a pure confessional one, revealing what is in her embittered psyche. Consequently, this voice becomes unbridled, questing for her true self that it seems to her as much far fetched as her sorrow and misery increase. Hence, the dominance of the reality principle as the poet's means to recognize her self can be observed in her themes and style. The group of poems composed between 1956 and late 1959 and published first in a book of poetry entitled *The Colossus and other Poems* (1960) and then listed chronologically in *The Collected Poems* of *Sylvia Plath* (1981) are from this intermediary phase. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems* of *Sylvia Plath* (1981), Hughes, as an editor of the book, writes some lines concerning Plath's poetic development which are worth quoting here:

> The second phase of Sylvia Plath's writing falls between 1956 and late 1960. early 1965 represents itself as a watershed, because, from later this year come the earliest poems of her first collection, *The Colossus* … Her evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive moults of style, as she realized her true matter and voice. Each fresh phase tended to bring out a group of poems bearing a general family likeness. … At each move we made, we seemed to shed a style.[35]

Certainly, the poems of this phase are a reverberation of the poet's past experience and her mental state at the present time. They mostly tackle situations the poet engaged and her emotional reaction against. Each poem, as an independent artistic piece, uncovers the poet's disturbance at a given distressing event written in a language of multi-faceted layers of meanings. Also, Plath's poems of this period opens the gate to her poetic standing which reaches its peak in *Ariel* poems. More specific to the point, Sara Thorne comments on Plath's vision of this period as a mirror reflecting her reactions or at least her thoughts against the many hard experiences:

> Because Plath's poetry represents her search for herself, the poetry has its own frame of reference. Its associations and images, its recurring patterns and haunting repetitions are indicative of the way that Plath saw and related to the world around her. Dominating images are of death, miscarriage, failure, excess and pain; the ordinary, the domestic and the natural world become threatening. The images have a symbolic function, breaking through the surfaces of appearance and shocking us into recognizing deeper levels of meaning.[36]

Definitely, the major poems of *The Colossus* are mainly about, according to Throne, Plath's personal experiences like death, miscarriage, and failure as well as many other themes, reflecting Plath's feelings under the impact of the outer world and its disturbances. Too, as these

themes associate, Plath has been put in the tension between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, in Freudian terms, when the latter dominates as an alternative guiding to pleasure attainment. Thus, the function of the reality principle is to carry on the postponement of satisfaction, the department of the factors securing that satisfaction and the temporary acceptance of unpleasure as an intermediate step toward pleasure attainment.[37]

Since the reality principle is fully adhered, Plath, in her last poems, intends to employ almost every poetic device to produce poetic works that shape her inner thoughts as a poet suffering from the unrelieved agony of life and quest urgently for the self recognition. Plath's poem "Two Sisters of Persephone" images two different sisters in line with the allusion of Persephone. They are both described by one poetic voice in the poem. They metaphorically visualize the two sides of Persephone. The poet makes use of allusion of Persephone to recast her mental status. It has its background in Greek mythology. Persephone was the daughter of Zeus and Demeter and was taken to the underworld as a wife of Hades, the lord of the dead. As she disregarded the order not to eat anything in the underworld in order to be back to the living world, she ate the seeds of pomegranate. Ergo, Persephone was allowed back to the living world for a part of the year but she ought to return to the underworld for the remaining months of the year. Her coming to the living world was heralded by the start of spring while on her return to the underworld hinted for the coming of winter.[38]

The rendering of the two sisters depicts the two ambivalent sides of Persephone and the poet's bewilderment as well. The first sister is portrayed as dark and inflicted, working with a mathematical machine.

> In her dark wainscoted room
> The first works problems on
> A mathematical machine.
> Dry ticks mark time
> (*CP*,5-8, 31)

Also, these introductory lines reflect the poet's current mental state hen she wishes to become either a notable writer or a kind mother. She has been pun in between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Her will here is determined by the guidance and regulation of the reality principle. However, the image of the second sister counters the inward state of the poet which coincides with Persephone's life in the underworld.

Obviously, the second sister differs from the former the former is that she is light and happy. She gets married and "[g]rows quick with seeds." (*CP*,22, 32) The gaiety and jubilance of the second sister remains only for a short period of time. Although she get married and bears a

king, her status has been transformed into much as miserable as the first sister who remains virgin up to death,

> She bears a king. Turned bitter
>
> And sallow as any lemon,
>
> (*CP*,24-25, 32)

The sudden shift in "[t]urned bitter" (24, 32) reveals the sister's condition after being in a pleasant and luxurious one. Although satisfied physically, she turns into a deplorable psychic state as the first sister who is deprived physically.

Sine the psychological aspect of Plath's poetry as a typical confessional poet should not be underestimated, there is no hesitation to identify the two sisters, embodying the two sides of Persephone: one half in the upper world and the other in the underworld, as reflecting Plath's real ambitions as a woman and artist which seem farfetched to her and her inner thoughts as an outcome for these ambitions. As a result, both sisters are in a bitter condition. In the last stanza, the prevail of the reality principle can clearly be recognized. The poet could neither fulfill her wishes as a woman nor alleviate her disquieted inner feelings as a regular reaction against life pressures. Certainly, the decline of the pleasure principle and the prevalence of the reality principle is getting predominant in Plath's later poems. This prevalence is according to the frequently hardened circumstances to poet endures.

It is axiomatic that the confessional poets compose their works as a kind of unbridled inspiration to confess what is in their inner psyche which is mostly disturbing and, simultaneously, claim their longing to get rid of these grim feelings resulted from life routine. In line with this trend, Plath's very last poems are appreciated as earnest steps for recognizing her true self lost in this routine through a unique poetic inspiration which reaches its maturity and authenticity as to be realized in her poems "Words" and "Edge," both trigger the imminence of the poet's self-determined death. They are written within few days before her suicide. Hence, they are the denouement of the poet's dilemma of self and an approval of Freud's conception of the instincts: Eros and Thanatos.

"Words" is an obvious remark of the growth of Plath's poetic voice and is also an exemplar confessional masterpiece through which she also confirms her loss of self and glorifies death as retaining her self. The poem treats the psychological state of the poet with the triumph of Thanatos. It is reviewed as "a poem of mourning, mourning for a lost image of the self."[39] It envisions the poet's bewilderment with this loss. In the first two stanzas, the roughness of the poetic diction and the impact of the metaphors contribute to show the harshness of the poet's

suffering as the poem is written in the first person I and in the present tense to focus on the poet's present miserable state:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from the center like horses.
(*CP*, 1-5, 270)

The axes associate the major theme of the poem. It compares between the consequence of words and that of axes so as to bring to mind the poet's ambition to put her thoughts into words through such a vivid metaphor. In the second stanza, the poem's mood changes to drag the reader's attention to the poet's urgent need for calmness:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
(*CP*, 6-10, 270)

These lines exaggerate the poet's spiritual bitterness and develops to include the physical harm which is, in Freud's terms, the source of pleasure for her after the decline of all other sources with which the self is lost. Thus, DeSales Harrison comments on the poem as tackling Plath's concern with the outer world pressures impairing her inner psyche, making her shattered among them, and then causing her loss of her desired image of herself:

> What the poem ["Words"] invokes most pointedly is Plath's preoccupation with the different agencies that govern, or seek to govern, a life, and the nature of the division between them. As an elegy of an *I* that disperses into a group of disparate properties, the poem focuses most closely on a loss, the loss of the image of the self, and to this extent, the shadow of a coherent self falls across the poem.[40]

As Harrison contends, the evaluation of the poem shows that the poet deals with both her psychic and physical conditions. She involves the metaphor to approach both conditions and implement her claim of the loss of the cohesive self as a main theme in the poem which the poet quests as well. Later in the last stanza but one, the image of the rock turning to a "white skull," (*CP*, 12, 270) shapes the poet's agony which moves beyond her psyche and includes her body. It also inspires the poet's change from active to depressed when death becomes at two bow's length from her. In the last stanza, she asserts her decisive continuance with death to attain pleasure and realize the self:

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

(*CP*, 18-20, 270)

Plath's last poem entitled "Edge", written after "Words" accomplishes the poet's theme of the determined death. It is appreciated as a call for suicide. Written with two-line ten stanzas, the poem depicts the edge of the poet's life as ends willingly by suicide. The word "preferred" (*CP*,1, 272) proves her recognition of the desired image of the self by the guidance of Thanatos. It foreshadows the inevitability of the poet's departure. The allusion of the Medea and the moon's role ensure her death.[41] As s symbol of cruelty. Medea[42] is referred to in this poem to incorporate the poet's inner aggressive and her speedy wish for self destruction.

Moreover, the images mentioned in the poem are f noted psychological significance. It is best chosen to reflect the searing difficulties and harsh circumstances the poet encounters and writes about in almost every poem during her poetic journey from juvenilia up to this poem. In the third and fourth stanzas, the poet mentions

Her bare

Feed seem to be saying
We have come so far, it is over.

(*CP*, 6-8, 272)

The bare feet imply the poet's relief from her unbearable duties and their obstacles which keep her from her ambitious as a woman and artist. In the fifth stanza, the poet presents her children as dead to reveal the heaviness they impose on her especially when they become fatherless,

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty

(*CP*, 9-11, 272)

Having contented her two children as the inevitable source of suggesting, the poet resorts to nature to further clarifying the imminence of death and her longing for it to attain pleasure and recognize the true self:

> In "Edge" Plath uses the Imagery of the hightened Odours of flowers at night To make death more alluring. In "Edge" Plath uses metaphors to emphasise and justify her own death and that of her two children. In death Plath reaches the satisfaction denied her in life…. Plath is likening her death to the satisfaction of having achieved a major accomplishment.[43]

Alongside, the poet's reference to the moon intensifies her satisfaction with death. "[t]he moon, ancient goddess and muse, need not grieve, for this is neither unexpected nor unusual. She has

seen it many times before when a woman gives up the struggle to juggle the many facets of her life."[44]So far the significance of the poem as the last written during the poet's life, Annas appreciates "Edge" as the best and even most frightening poem ever written in *Ariel*

> Because it ["Edge"] renders death both as luxuriant response And as art, "Edge" is perhaps The most frightening poem in *Ariel*. The language is so beautiful that the reader is seduced toward accepting the poem's conclusion. The mood is calm, even peaceful. The speaker of the poem describes in a detached and slow, almost incantatory rhythm, a woman who is already dead. The poem has the quality of a still photograph.[45]

The poem's mood, rhythm and alliteration are harmonically organized to inform the poet's intention. It can be evaluated as a living psychological embodiment of the triumph of Thanatos as the poet notifies her willing suicide to attain the diminished pleasure and recognize the desired self she searched for. Plath's later poems are mostly written to confess her sufferings and their sources. She also intends to reveal her quest for escaping these suffering and understanding the meaning of her existence. It is reasonable from the poems appreciated in the second chapter that Plath's intermediary phase of poetry is essentially concerned with her craft as a poet. They are scarce confessional if compared wither later poetic works published in *Ariel*.

In her later poems, Plath unbridles her typical confessional poetic voice through which she aspire her inner gruesome psychological state which worsens due to the increase of the pressures of the outer world and results in the poet's belief in suicide as a kind of escape from these untolerable pressures. Hence, the main implication of these poems suggest the development of Plath's poetic inspiration which is regulated and guided by the conflict of her instincts. The eclipse of death as a theme and the poet's intention attests this conflict between her desire to live as a woman, wife, mother and poet and her contemplation of the determined death as an exit from life which is full of sorrow. Thus A. Alvarez remarks that Plath writes mainly about death "when she and her husband separated, whether she was willing or not, she again went through the same piercing grief and bereavement she had left as a child where here father, by his death, seemed to abandon her"[46]. As her poetic inspiration develops to uncover all these sufferings, the eclipse of Thanatos is the obvious evidence of the poet's belief of suicide as an outlet from them and the source of the diminished pleasure in which the poet recognizes that the transition to a better life is through death.

Notes

[1]Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 52.

[2]Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Karen K. Kukil ed., (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), all subsequent references are to this edition.

[3]Robyn Marsack, *Sylvia Plath* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 4-5.

[4]Ibid., 86.

[5]Marsack, 86.

[6]Bassnett, 15.

[7]Marsack, 11.

[8]Quoted in Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 94.

[9]Helen Vendler, *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merril* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 52.

[10]Helen Mcneil, "Sylvia Plath" in *Voices and Visions: The Poet in America*, ed. Helen Vendler (New Delhi, Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1989), 486.

[11]Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* trans. and ed., James Starchey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 40.

[12]Ibid., 1.

[13]Philip G. Zimbardo, *Essentials of Psychology and Life,* 10th ed, (USA: Scott, Forseman and Company, 1980), 304.

[14]Freud, 4.

[15]Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" in *The Pelican Freud Library: On Metapsychology* , ed. James Starcheym vol. 11, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 11: 36-37.

[16]___________, "The Ego and the Id" in *The Pelican Freud Library: On Metapsychology,* ed. James Starchey, vol. 11, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962),380.

[17]Quoted in Fătima Caropreso & Richard Theisen, "Life and death in Freudian metapsychology: a reappraisal of the second instinctual dualism" in *On Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Salman Akhtar and Mary K. O' Neil eds., (London: Karnac Books, 2011), 87.

[18]Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, xvii-iii.

[19]Ibid., 29.

[20] Ibid., 9-10.

[21]Zimbardo, 304.

[22]Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 23-24.

[23] ___________, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed., James Starchey (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1962), 24.

[24] Ibid., 69.

[25]Ibid., 66.

[26].Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 155.

[27]Quoted in Beach, 155.

[28]Quoted in Ibid.

[29]Jo Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,2008), 30.

[30]Vendler, 47.

[31]Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 25-6.

[32] In fact, Wordsworth's concept of the poet corresponds to that of the confessionals but it differs essentially in that the poetic diction is not necessarily simple and the main topic is not to be imagined since the confessional poet, unlike the romantics, purely tackles his/her own personal experiences to the reader. Here, Plath's main task is to confess her dreary feelings as an endeavor to realize the self. It can possibly interpreted that the poet accomplishes this quest through the embracement of the reality principle as an impressive confessional means between her and the reader.

[33]Jessica Hritz McCort, "Getting out of Wonderland: Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Anne Sexton" (Master's Thesis, Washington University, 2009). In Washington University Electronic Theses & Dissertations, http://digital-wustl.edu/e/etd/pdf/McCort_wustl_0252D_10142.pdf (accessed March, 27, 2012), 129-30.

[34]Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*, ed., Ted Hughes (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), all subsequent references are to this edition and are parenthetically given, in the text, with the abbreviation *CP* followed by the line(s) and page number(s).

[35]Ted Hughes Introduction to *The Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 16.

[36]Sara Thorne, *Mastering Poetry* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), 370.

[37]Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 4.

[38]Martin H. Manser, *The Facts on File Dictionary of Allusions*, David H. Pickering, ed., (New York: Checkmark Books, 2009), 367.

[39]DeSales Harrison The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 134.

[40]Ibid, 135.

[41]Tim Kendall, "From the Bottom of the Pool: Sylvia Plath's Last Poems," in *Sylvia Plath: Updared Edition*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 163.

[42]See Manser, 309.

[43]Carol Margaret Houston, "Emotional Intelligence in the Later Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich." (PhD diss., Griffith University, 2007). In Australian Digital Theses Program (ADT) http://www4.gu.edu.au:8080/adt-root/.../01front.pdf (accessed May 15, 2012), 63.

[44]Bassnett, 137.

[45]Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 122.

[46]A. Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath: A Miscalculation?" in *Suicidal Thoughts: Essays on Self-Determined Death*, Max Malikow ed., (United Kingdom: Hamilton Books, 2009), 2.

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